



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

HILLEL
SEGAL

Speed reading program needs too much effort

The "average" person is probably an average reader. But people who put on seminars about speed reading contend you don't have to be average. With a little training, you may be able to actually double or triple your speed and improve your comprehension at the same time. And now, a disk-based program is available for personal computers (IBM PC, Apple and others) that promises to make you a speed-demon in less time and for less money than going to a class or seminar.

Since I've considered taking a speed reading course for years but never got around to it, the disk version of "The Evelyn Wood Dynamic Reader" (Timeworks Inc., Deerfield, Ill.) caught my eye. Was it actually possible to get the benefits of the expensive seminar with the \$89.95 disk program? I set out to find out.

Perhaps like yourself, I'm always reading — business letters, technical papers, trade magazines, business publications, newspapers and advertising. It seems endless, and there's always a stack of more material to be reviewed. The possibility that all this reading could be done in half the time is certainly intriguing. But is it realistic? Or is it just an empty promise? The concept might make money for the seminar presenters and software publishers, but will it work for me?

Lots of potential

After installing the program on my computer and giving it a try, here's what I discovered:

✓ The disk-based speed reading course for the IBM PC is composed of two disks, a user's manual and a supplementary reading booklet. It is relatively easy to set up and get started.

✓ The course is based upon a technique of scanning a page of text with your hand as a pacer. Your eyes follow your hand, and this avoids back-tracking and re-reading what

you've already covered. With practice, you're taught not to say the words in your mind as you read and to read words in groups instead of one at a time.

✓ Unlike other computer-based training courses that are totally screen oriented — giving directions and asking the user to manipulate data on the screen — this one bounced back and forth between the manual, the supplementary reading booklet and the screen. In fact, when I first tried to ignore the manual and just follow the screen directions, I became hopelessly lost.

✓ After starting over and following the directions in the manual step by step, it made more sense. You are first given a timed reading comprehension test, then asked to set goals, and then urged to practice the exercises that are provided.

✓ The computer acts essentially as a timing and scoring device. By hitting a key as you start an exercise and after you finish, your words-per-minute reading speed is calculated. Then, after each reading, a series of questions are asked to test your understanding and a comprehension percentage calculated. (If you get half the questions right, for example, it figures out that your comprehension is 50 percent.)

✓ After doing a few of the exercises, you begin to see yourself making progress. Your scores increase as the hand and eye technique is employed. The technique seems to work.

Potential unfulfilled

Just because the technique seems to work, however, it does not necessarily follow that this particular disk-based program is effective. Even though I was an enthusiastic student, I still experienced a significant problem that is probably avoided with a class-room course — I was not lead from start to finish by the program with clear instructions. As a result, it was too easy to skip exercises and fail to finish.

The problem lies in the design of the disk-based program. Most effective computer-aided learning programs are completely screen based, with little need for a manual or other materials. You simply sit down in front of the computer and follow the instructions that are given. All the exercises are presented on the screen, and you are always directed at the end of each one. If a certain speed is not reached, for example, another exercise is given before you are allowed to go on. Such programs are generally very effective.

With actual speed reading courses, the whole class does the exercises together, providing strong direction for the student. True, practice outside the class is necessary, but it is not left as an option that's easy to avoid if you want to keep up with the class.

The disk-based program, on the other hand, hardly directs the student at all. The exercises are offered in the materials, and the means to score yourself is available on the computer, but it is simply too easy to skip the exercises if you have (like we all do) many other activities competing for our attention.

THE BOTTOM LINE: If the idea of reading faster appeals to you, the Evelyn Wood technique seems to be effective — even if this particular disk-based program is not. Don't waste your time or money with this program — sign up for a speed reading course instead!

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and editor of the Executive Computing Newsletter, published by the Association of Computer Users. He can be reached at AOL P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.